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Folic acid meeting MS

A note on discussions of the folate status of the population in the European Community and strategies for change

Introduction

At its meeting in September 2006 the Advisory Forum suggested that a discussion forum between Member States take place in order to share experiences and concerns associated with fortification of foods on the European market with folic acid. This proposal was against the background of different public health policies and risk management strategies being implemented across the European Union to address the occurrence neural tube defects. A meeting was organised by the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) and was attended by thirty-one participants from 14 EU Member States and Switzerland. The meeting was hosted by the BfR in Berlin, 11-12 January 2007.

Summary of key issues discussed

Incidence of neural tube defects (NTDs)

There is significant variation in the incidence of NTDs across the European Union. The EUROCAT register for NTDs in Europe is incomplete. There was broad recognition among participants of the need for a reliable database of NTD rates for monitoring the impact of folic acid supplementation or fortification measures.

Intake of folic acid

A common reference value for folate intake in Europe does not exist. Additionally there is not common approach to measuring folate status of the European population. A reliable comparison of intakes between MS is not possible.

Advice on food supplements containing folic acid

As a public health measure many MS advise sexually active women to take folic acid supplements to reduce the likelihood of NTDs. There was broad agreement that this policy has been unsuccessful as only a minority of women follow this advice.

Voluntary fortification with folic acid

There is a wide range of food products available on the European markets which are fortified with folic acid. This can lead to uneven and unpredictable intakes across the whole population. Monitoring both levels in voluntary fortified foods and intakes of folic acid can be difficult due to market fluctuations. In order to ensure safe levels of consumption, there is a need to limit the numbers of foods fortified with folic acid and to set an upper level for voluntary fortification.

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Mandatory fortification with folic acid

Currently no European Member State has a policy of mandatory fortification of foods with folic acid but this is under active discussion in some EU MS. The risks and benefits of mandatory fortification were discussed. The need to maintain consumer choice and restrict voluntary fortification of foods was noted, as was the need for monitoring the effects of introducing mandatory fortification. Safety aspects of introducing folic acid into the diet of the whole population were discussed and gaps in our knowledge identified.

Next steps

The minutes of the meeting at the BfR will be circulated to the Advisory Forum before the end of February together with conclusions and recommendations. The Advisory Forum is requested to consider whether this cooperation is considered suitable as a front-runner project in the context of the EFSA strategy on Cooperation and Networking with EU Member States through its Advisory Forum.